

12/17/21 Friday

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UN Human Rights Council Votes Over Every African Member to Probe Alleged Tigray Abuses
By - Morgan Artyukhina

In a special Friday session, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHCR) voted to open an investigation of alleged human rights abuses in Ethiopia's Tigray state. However, the issue wasn't brought up by a single African nation and no African member of the council voted for the probe.

The UNHCR will establish an international commission of three experts on Ethiopia to probe alleged human rights abuses by all parties in the conflict, the council [announced on Friday](#). The panel will have a one-year, renewable mandate and build upon a report [submitted last month](#) by the Office of the High Commissioner and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, which covered the period from the Tigray People's Liberation Front's (TPLF) attack on Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) units in Tigray on November 3, 2020, until June 28, 2021. The 47-member council narrowly voted for the proposed investigation, with 21 nations voting for it and 15 voting against it, while 11 nations abstained. Notably, all 13 African nations on the council either voted "no" or abstained. The meeting was requested earlier this week by the European Union and cosigned by more than 50 UN member states - although on [that list as well](#), not a single African nation appeared.

The decision represents a rare decision to immediately invoke [Special Procedures](#) instead of addressing the issue through Universal Periodic Review, a state-driven process that allows governments to hold themselves accountable to their human rights obligations.

Speaking [ahead of the meeting](#), Zenebe Kebede, Ethiopia's permanent representative to the United Nations, denounced the "very underhand manner this special session was initiated," saying it revealed the meeting's "ulterior political objectives."

Kebede added that the council was "being used as an instrument of political pressure" and had been "hijacked by a neo-colonialist mentality."

"Ethiopia is being targeted and singled out at the Human Rights Council for defending a democratically elected government, the peace and the future of its people," he said.

After the council's decision was announced, the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it was "extremely disappointed to have witnessed once again the use of the Human Rights Council by some to advance their politically motivated agenda."

Noting the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had asked the UNHCR not to hold the emergency meeting, but to instead "engage in a constructive manner and work in a collaborative spirit" with them, the ministry said the decision was made "against the recommendations by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission which were [submitted to the President](#) of the Human Rights Council on 14 December 2021 and to all members of the Council requesting it to unequivocally support the implementation of the Joint Investigation

Team's recommendations, the work of the Inter-Ministerial Task Force and for the OHCHR and the EHRC to continue with further joint investigations."

"Ethiopia would like to reiterate that it will not cooperate with the established mechanism imposed upon it against its consent," the statement continues. "No More to double standards; No More to unilateral coercive measures; and No More to meddling in internal affairs under the pretext of human rights."

US Selectively Ignores TPLF Crimes

The US, an observer state to the UNHCR that called for the meeting, gave its own statement about alleged human rights violations in Ethiopia, but only mentioned those allegedly targeting ethnic Tigrayans, making no call for accountability for alleged crimes committed by the TPLF.

"The United States is gravely concerned by unconfirmed new reports alleging mass detentions, killings, and forced expulsions of ethnic Tigrayans in western Tigray by Amhara security forces," US State Department spokesperson Ned [Price said on Friday](#).

"We call on Amhara leaders to renounce violence against civilians. We also reiterate our call on Eritrea to remove its forces from Ethiopia. We urge the Ethiopian authorities to investigate these reports to determine their veracity and to commit to inclusive, transparent processes to hold responsible those accountable," Price said. "We call on all armed actors in Ethiopia to renounce and end violence against civilians. We also reiterate our call for a cessation of hostilities, an immediate end to human rights abuses and violations, negotiations without preconditions, unhindered humanitarian access, and the start to an inclusive national dialogue."

The US statement comes a day after Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International [each published](#) reports [on the topic](#). However, a week prior, HRW also published a report about [executions of dozens](#) of civilians by the TPLF in northern Amhara in August and September and called for an inquiry, about which the US made no similar statement, even as it made [general declarations](#) about Human Rights Day.

Indeed, neither NGO or the US has said anything about the [more recent evidence](#) of TPLF crimes to emerge as the ENDF recaptured dozens of towns in Amhara and Afar over the past month, revealing not only the looting of UN World Food Program warehouses but also hospitals, airports, and other locations, as well as executions of civilians.

Kebede noted Friday that the TPLF is designated by the Ethiopian parliament as a terrorist organization and that the group had commandeered "more than 1,000 trucks delivering humanitarian supplies to the people in Tigray region and used them for military purposes."

"The initiators of this Special Session would not care less," he added.

The war has, without a doubt, created a massive humanitarian crisis. [More than 70,000](#) people had fled across the border into neighboring Sudan and an [estimated 4 million](#) more internally displaced, according to United Nations data. In addition, [some 9.4 million](#) people also require food aid. There is no reliable death toll for the conflict.

Simon Tesfamariam, executive director of the New Africa Institute, [wrote on Telegram](#) that it was "no accident that 'Ethiopia' (and the #TigrayGenocide) hashtag was trending in the US yesterday in the lead up to the UN HRC vote."

"To help get these hashtags trending and to vilify Ethiopia before the vote, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International spiked the media and internet yesterday with joint publications about a 'new wave' of atrocities against Tigrayans. This was also primed and synced with an article on supposed atrocities against Tigrayans published on Katie Couric's KCM platform, which

ironically misused a Jemal Countess photo of an Amhara girl to misleadingly suggest atrocities on Tigrayan children. All of these publications came at a time that retreating TPLF forces are on a murderous rampage in the Amhara region and destroying hospitals in a cruel scorched earth strategy before their own imminent death and/or surrender. Ethiopian forces haven't even been in Tigray since late June."

[Sputnik reported](#) in late November on Twitter's arbitrary suspension of Tesfamariam's account, along with the page Horn of Africa Hub, which helped coordinate the [#NoMore protest campaign](#) by the Ethiopian and Eritrean diasporas that called for the West to stay out of the respective nations' affairs.

US Neutrality Camouflages TPLF Support

The US has publicly maintained a position of neutrality in the conflict like that reflected in Price's Friday statement, but evidence has mounted that Washington is actually deeply entwined in the war.

Last month, a [video of a secretive meeting](#) was leaked to the press, at which US and European diplomats, including US Ambassador to Somalia Donald Yamamoto, praised the TPLF's advance on Addis Ababa and discussed the group's potential formation of a "transition government" with a senior TPLF figure, Berhane Ghebre-Christos, who served as Ethiopia's foreign minister under a past TPLF-led government.

Then, earlier this month, TPLF spokesperson Getachew Reda plainly said in two [interviews on Tigrayan television](#) that the US had advised them to enter Addis Ababa, although he confessed the Americans seemed divided about their expectations from the group.

The US has sanctioned Abiy's government and [its ally, Eritrea](#), for actions it says have prolonged the conflict and threatened Ethiopia's integrity, and [withheld \\$272 million](#) in aid over alleged human rights abuses. However, it has never issued sanctions against the TPLF, despite occasional rhetorical castigations.

During the 27 years prior to 2018 that the TPLF was in power, it cooperated closely with the US' War on Terror and the newly formed US Africa Command (USAFRICOM), including invading Somalia in 2006 and overthrowing the Islamic Courts Union government, of which Washington disapproved. It also fought a disastrous war with Eritrea that killed more than 120,000 people. When Abiy was selected for the prime ministry over a TPLF candidate in 2018, he quickly moved to end the war, being given a Nobel Peace Prize for the effort. However, even that has been weaponized against Abiy, as a New York Times article published on Wednesday demonstrated. [Regional experts told Sputnik](#) the article made clear that Washington intends to punish Abiy for making peace with Eritrea, which has long been an international pariah subject to sanctions and which has uniquely refused to cooperate with AFRICOM.

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US Prepared for Dialogue With Russia 'in the Appropriate Format' - Sullivan
By - Morgan Artyukhina

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said Friday the US believed there was still an opportunity for progress in talks with Russia held "in the appropriate format."

"We have been clear as the United States - and just yesterday, the 30 nations of the NATO alliance were clear in a statement that came out of the North Atlantic Council - we're prepared for dialogue with Russia," Sullivan said Friday at an event hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations think tank in Washington, DC.

"We've had dialogue with Russia on European security issues for the last 20 years. We had it with the Soviet Union for decades before that. That has sometimes produced progress, sometimes produced deadlock, but we are fundamentally prepared for dialogue," the security adviser said. "Russia has now put on the table its concerns with American and NATO activities, we're going to put on the table our concern with Russian activities that we believe harm our interest and values. That's the basis of reciprocity upon which you would pursue any kind of dialogue."

Sullivan added that while progress would be possible in some areas, the two nuclear powers were likely to continue disagreeing. He didn't elaborate on which areas he thought unity or disparity might occur.

"[F]undamentally, our strategy is going to be coordinate closely, to have allied unity, and then be prepared to sit with Russia and respond positively to the idea that we can have a discussion in the appropriate format, on the principle of 'nothing about you without you,' and see where it takes us," he added.

US President Joe Biden spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the phone last week, but their talks yielded little more than [threats by Biden](#) to impose crippling sanctions on Moscow in the event of an invasion of Ukraine, including cutting it off from the SWIFT international bank transfer network and attempting to close the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Germany.

Russian De-Escalation Proposals Ignored

Sullivan's comments come after a [call on Thursday](#) by NATO for Russia to "immediately de-escalate, pursue diplomatic channels, and abide by its international commitments on transparency of military activities."

The alliance, which includes six nations that share a border with the Russian Federation, said it was "gravely concerned" by what it called the "substantial, unprovoked, and unjustified Russian military build-up on the borders of Ukraine in recent months," referring to the reported [transfer of Russian military units](#) into its southern region some distance from the border.

NATO and Ukraine, which is not a member of the alliance, have fretted that Moscow might be preparing for an invasion of Ukraine, but the administration of Russian President Vladimir Putin has denied such accusations, saying Russia has no intention of interfering in Ukrainian affairs.

The Russian Foreign Ministry has laid out a [detailed proposal for de-escalation](#) and longer-term security guarantees for both sides that NATO has so far not replied to.

The proposals include a commitment to limiting the size of military units engaged in exercises in areas close to Russian and NATO-member's borders, a maximum approach distance between ships and aircraft, and not using the territory of other nations to plan attacks on each other, including no further expansion eastward for NATO and no building of new NATO bases on the

territory of former Soviet republics that aren't members of the alliance - a thinly veiled reference to Ukraine that could also apply to Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has increased his pressure on NATO for Kiev to be admitted to the alliance, [claiming earlier this year](#) that NATO membership was the only solution to the civil war in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, where Russian-speaking minorities have defended their autonomy and minority rights from Kiev since a US-backed nationalist coup in 2014. The same coup caused Russian-speaking Crimea to declare independence from Kiev and later vote to rejoin Russia. NATO doesn't recognize the Crimean referendum, claiming Russia illegally seized the Black Sea peninsula and that Moscow is backing the self-declared Donbas republics - claims Moscow has denied.

Answering a question about if and why the White House wasn't looking to expand the [\\$450 million weapons package](#) sent to Kiev in 2021, Sullivan said the US was "constantly assessing additional needs that Ukraine has, putting together potential packages, and those packages are actively under consideration," adding it would ultimately be up to US President Joe Biden. He added there was "no particular calculus" about Russian concerns about those weapons packages.

Moscow has long worried about NATO's expansion eastward since the end of the Cold War. The Brussels-based alliance was formed in the late 1940s in response to fears of a Soviet attack, eventually growing to encompass most of Europe's capitalist nations. By 1955, a parallel alliance between the Soviet-allied socialist nations of Central and Eastern Europe, the Warsaw Pact, had also formed.

At the end of the Cold War, when socialism was overthrown in Europe and the Warsaw Pact dissolved, NATO leaders gave guarantees to the Soviet leadership that the alliance would make no attempt to expand eastward beyond a reunified Germany. However, in the 30 years since, nine former Soviet allies and former Soviet republics have joined the collective security pact, with substantial NATO forces being positioned in their territory following the events of 2014.

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US Says Understanding on Text of Nuclear Issues Reached With Iran as 7th Round of Vienna Talks Ends

By - Morgan Artyukhina

As the seventh round of talks on reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) conclude in Vienna, Austria, the US has said that Iran's expectations are not realistic, but that "moderate progress" was nonetheless made.

A senior Biden administration official said Friday that an agreement had been reached on the installation of security cameras at a key Iranian nuclear facility, as well as on the text of the deal as a whole. However, they expressed dismay that Iran chose to conclude the talks when it did, saying the US and other six parties to the 2015 deal were ready to continue their work advancing the talks.

The US is willing to do whatever it takes to stop Iran from getting a nuclear weapon if diplomacy fails, the official added.

Earlier this week, Tehran and the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA), the UN's nuclear watchdog, [reached an agreement](#) on installing cameras at the Karaj research facility after an [attack by agents](#) of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency damaged them earlier this year. No date for an eighth round of talks was announced. A six-month gap separated the seventh and sixth rounds of talks, although that was largely due to a [lengthy reevaluation period](#) following the change of administrations in Tehran, where Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi was inaugurated in August.

The 2015 deal set limits on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for the lowering of economic sanctions, but the US unilaterally withdrew in 2018, claiming without evidence that Iran had been secretly violating the deal. The Trump administration reinstated "maximum pressure" sanctions and provocative military and espionage actions against Tehran, severely hurting its economy and bringing Iran and the US to the brink of war.

As a consequence, Tehran began [reducing its commitments](#) to the deal, as the deal itself allows, increasing the quality and quantity of uranium-235 they refined. However, as [per a 2009 ruling](#) by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's top legal and political authority, the country has foresworn nuclear weapons and all weapons of mass destruction as being a violation of Islam's moral precepts.

After US President Joe Biden replaced Donald Trump in January, the US returned to the negotiating table with Iran, but has pushed for a more restrictive deal than before amid pressure by Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other US partners in the region.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - UAE Move to Scrap F-35 Deal Reflects Waning US Power in Multipolar World

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United Arab Emirates' (UAE) decision to suspend the purchase of F-35 Joint Strike Fighters is another sign Washington's allies are trying to reduce their reliance on US military power, which is on the wane due to overstretch in a multipolar world, analysts told Sputnik.

Abu Dhabi earlier this week suspended talks on a \$23 billion deal to buy fifty F-35 jets, in addition to drones and advanced munitions. Onerous US restrictions designed to protect against Chinese espionage have reportedly been a major driver of the UAE's decision.

On Friday, a US administration official told reporters the two sides are still trying to work out concerns related to the deal, including certain requests the UAE asked for during the Trump administration.

Former UK Ambassador to Syria Peter Ford believes Washington's hubristic demands such as disabling any capacity the aircraft might have to harm Israel, gave the UAE good excuses to exit the deal.

The UAE, he added, hates the strings the US wants to attach that would purportedly ensure that "even theoretically" the acquisition would not diminish Israel's military superiority.

"The Emiratis, rich but not stupid, have used this misstep as a pretext to halt the deal," Ford said.

Moreover, Ford added, the UAE is not willing to pay an inflated price for fighter aircraft when modern warfare is now more about drones, as illustrated in the Iranian attack on a Saudi oil facility in 2019 and Turkey's use of advanced drones to halt Syrian government advances in Idlib last year.

"If the deal goes ahead at all I would expect the planes to go now for a fire sale price," the former ambassador said.

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Ford also said the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is another development that has likely helped shift the UAE's thinking on the F-35 deal.

"The withdrawal has forced all the Gulf states into the realization that making their security wholly dependent on the US is unwise, and that some degree of detente with Iran is a better way of guaranteeing their security than becoming more and more beholden to the US," Ford said.

Historian and political commentator Dan Lazare thinks the main problem for the United States is "imperial over-extension" - a reality allies like the UAE are starting to fully realize.

The US military, Lazare explained, was theoretically equipped to fight a two-front war on opposite sides of the globe. However, he warned, the US was now facing the prospects of fighting on three fronts: the South China Sea/Taiwan Strait, the Persian Gulf, and in and around the Black Sea.

"US weakness is increasingly apparent and other countries have begun making alternative arrangements in response," Lazare told Sputnik.

Lazare said India's agreement to meet with Russia and China and its recent decision to produce 600K AK-203 assault rifles under a Russian license are examples of this phenomenon. Recent security talks between Russia and Indonesia fell into the same category, as did the emerging Chinese-Iranian military partnership and the new alliance between China and Nicaragua, he said.

"All are examples of small-to-middling countries waking up to the fact that the United States is no longer the only game in town and that they are now free to seek out partners elsewhere," Lazare said. "Unipolarity is fading in the rearview mirror whether the US likes it or not."

US tensions with the UAE over F-35s and drones reflected the same general trend. The emirates had, in fact, long pursued a relatively independent policy vis-a-vis the US, Iran, and the Saudis, Lazare recalled.

"Abu Dhabi has thus bucked Washington by backing [President] Bashar al-Assad in Syria and [Marshal] Khalifa Haftar in Libya and by aligning with Russian foreign policy in both nations as well. It has kept a finger in the pie in Yemen and has backed the military coup in the Sudan, both of which cause consternation in Washington," he said.

Negotiations over the F-35 sale would certainly continue for the present, but the UAE statement this week had marked a genuine change in Washington's standing in the region, Lazare cautioned.

"Undoubtedly, talks will go on as the two sides try to reach a modus vivendi. But the message is clear: Multipolarity has arrived and the Persian Gulf is no longer a US lake," he concluded.

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RPT - Guterres on Moscow's New Security Proposals: UN Welcomes US-Russia Dialogue

UNITED NATIONS, December 17 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomes the dialogue between Russia and the United States on the new security arrangements with NATO proposed by Moscow, United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq told Sputnik.

"The Secretary-General has taken [note] of the relevant media reports. We welcome dialogue, at various levels, between the Russian Federation and the United States, to address differences, de-escalate tensions, and safeguard regional peace," Haq said.

The spokesperson also said Guterres has reminded all stakeholders of their responsibility "to ensure a peaceful settlement of the conflict in eastern Ukraine accordance with the Minsk Agreements as endorsed by the Security Council in its resolution 2202 (2015) and reiterates the UN's support to all ongoing negotiation efforts to that end."

Earlier on Friday, Russia released its draft proposals on security guarantees, including that NATO must commit to not expand further, such as in Ukraine and abandon military activities in that country as well as in Eastern Europe, Transcaucasia and Central Asia. Another proposal stipulates that Russia and NATO should not deploy intermediate- and short-range missiles in areas where they can hit each other's territory.

Security issue has surged in importance amid tensions in and around Ukraine, as United States and its allies have accused Russia of deploying troops and military hardware near the Ukrainian border in preparation for an invasion. Russia has repeatedly denied the accusations, saying that NATO's military activities near its borders are a national security threat. Russia has also said it has the right to move forces within its own sovereign territory.

US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin held virtual talks on December 7 during which they discussed the situation with respect to Ukraine. Biden voiced concern over the current developments and called for a diplomatic solution. Putin said that Kiev did not comply with the Minsk accords and also note that NATO continues to seek expansion eastward while conducting military build-up near the Russian borders.

On Wednesday, US Assistant Secretary of State Karen Donfried met in Moscow with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov and Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff Dmitry Kozak. The Russian Foreign Ministry said after the meeting that the participants had discussed the security guarantees in light of the ongoing attempts by the United States and NATO to change the military and political situation in Europe in their favor.

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RPT - Russian Security Proposals Unlikely to Stop US, NATO Aggression - Anti-War Group

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - Moscow's proposals on security guarantees are tactically good, however, they will not stop US and NATO aggression towards Russia, United National Antiwar Coalition (UNAC) coordinator Joe Lombardo told Sputnik.

On Friday, Moscow published draft agreements between Russia, the United States and NATO on security guarantees. The proposals, if agreed to, would ban NATO from expanding eastward and prohibit the US and Russia from deploying intermediate and shorter-range missiles within striking distance of each other's territory, among other terms.

"I think it is important for Russia to make this proposal but I think it will not stop the US and NATO from their aggression towards Russia and other countries," Lombardo said. "US imperialism has a dynamic of its own and it will always try to expand and undercut any country that will not be dominated by the US."

Lombardo said the proposals are "good tactically" because it helps the world see that one side wants peace and the other side is the aggressor.

"However, because of the controlled corporate media, most people in the US will never hear about this proposal," Lombardo said.

Washington will not agree to these points because the US and NATO want to make Russia part of their neoliberal sphere of domination, he added.

Moreover, Lombardo said, the tensions feed the US military-industrial complex, which is a major part of the American economy. The US, he noted, has troops in 172 countries and about 20 times the number of foreign military bases as all other countries combined.

Lombardo said the US aggression happens in the context of a changing world.

"The US is being bypassed as the dominant economic power by China," he said. "The countries that the US has sanctioned, which is now about 42 countries, have been working together to get around the sanctions."

Programs like China's Belt and Road initiative are changing the economic realities in the world, he added, while the Nordstream 2 natural gas pipeline to Germany is threatening the US and Ukraine.

"This makes the US more desperate and more dangerous," Lombardo concluded. "The US will not back down and this creates a very dangerous situation in the world."

The security issue has surged in importance on the backdrop of the growing tensions around Ukraine, as Russia stands accused of allegedly deploying troops near the Ukrainian border in preparation for an invasion.

Moscow has repeatedly denied those accusations, pointing to NATO's military activity near Russian borders, which it deems a threat to its national security. Russia has also said it has the right to move forces within its own territory.

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RPT - US Unlikely to Salvage F-35 Deal With UAE Amid Anti-China 'Hysteria' - Experts

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The multibillion-dollar US F-35 jet sale the United Arab Emirates recently suspended could permanently be killed by the Biden administration's inability to overcome concerns about the Gulf state's dealings with China, analysts told Sputnik.

Abu Dhabi earlier this week announced the suspension of negotiations on a \$23 billion deal to buy fifty US F-35s, in addition to drones and advanced munitions, citing technical requirements, "sovereign operational restrictions," and cost/benefit analysis.

US security requirements designed to protect against Chinese espionage are among the key drivers behind the UAE's decision to suspend talks. The US has also raised concerns over Abu Dhabi's relationship with China, including its use of Huawei 5G technology.

"At the moment, this is bargaining by the UAE, not a rejection of the proposed purchase: But a rejection is entirely possible," former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Chas Freeman told Sputnik. "Given the level of anti-China hysteria in the Pentagon at present, it's hard to say whether the sale will go through."

Freeman, a former assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, said the United States risks killing the deal for Lockheed Martin due to its excessive restrictions on the technology it is prepared to transfer.

"What was a Trump administration enticement to compensate Abu Dhabi for the political difficulty of entering an overt relationship with Israel is now caught up in Washington's obsession with the growth of Chinese power," Freeman said.

If the sale does not go through, Freeman added, it will have an effect on the UAE's new relationship with Israel, "which is very unpopular with ordinary Emiratis."

"Wheels within wheels are in motion," Freeman said.

The UAE has taken heat in many parts of the Arab world for agreeing to the Abraham Accords – a US-brokered effort to normalize relations with Israel, which could be a factor in the Gulf state's decision.

Institute for Research Middle Eastern Policy (IRmep) Director of Research, Grant Smith, said UAE leaders were already disappointed at the failure of Israel to use its political power in Washington through the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

"This sale is dead," Smith told Sputnik. "The UAE is now reeling under Abraham Accord pressure to acquiesce to Israeli strategic initiatives, but AIPAC and Israel are showing they can't really deliver things from the United States that UAE wants, like the advanced version of the fighter."

Smith noted that at the beginning of this month, the UAE announced it would buy 80 French-built Rafale fighter jets and 12 military helicopters in a gigantic \$19 billion deal that was the largest ever overseas sale of the combat aircraft.

"So the French fighters are good enough," Smith said. "And UAE may cancel lesser known Abraham Accord concessions ... which could have vastly enriched AIPAC and state Israel lobby groups."

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WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - Moscow's proposals on security guarantees are tactically good, however, they will not stop US and NATO aggression towards Russia, United National Antiwar Coalition (UNAC) coordinator Joe Lombardo told Sputnik.

On Friday, Moscow published draft agreements between Russia, the United States and NATO on security guarantees. The proposals, if agreed to, would ban NATO from expanding eastward and prohibit the US and Russia from deploying intermediate and shorter-range missiles within striking distance of each other's territory, among other terms.

"I think it is important for Russia to make this proposal but I think it will not stop the US and NATO from their aggression towards Russia and other countries," Lombardo said. "US imperialism has a dynamic of its own and it will always try to expand and undercut any country that will not be dominated by the US."

Lombardo said the proposals are "good tactically" because it helps the world see that one side wants peace and the other side is the aggressor.

"However, because of the controlled corporate media, most people in the US will never hear about this proposal," Lombardo said.

Washington will not agree to these points because the US and NATO want to make Russia part of their neoliberal sphere of domination, he added.

Moreover, Lombardo said, the tensions feed the US military-industrial complex, which is a major part of the American economy. The US, he noted, has troops in 172 countries and about 20 times the number of foreign military bases as all other countries combined.

Lombardo said the US aggression happens in the context of a changing world.

"The US is being bypassed as the dominant economic power by China," he said. "The countries that the US has sanctioned, which is now about 42 countries, have been working together to get around the sanctions."

Programs like China's Belt and Road initiative are changing the economic realities in the world, he added, while the Nordstream 2 natural gas pipeline to Germany is threatening the US and Ukraine.

"This makes the US more desperate and more dangerous," Lombardo concluded. "The US will not back down and this creates a very dangerous situation in the world."

The security issue has surged in importance on the backdrop of the growing tensions around Ukraine, as Russia stands accused of allegedly deploying troops near the Ukrainian border in preparation for an invasion.

Moscow has repeatedly denied those accusations, pointing to NATO's military activity near Russian borders, which it deems a threat to its national security. Russia has also said it has the right to move forces within its own territory.

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Arrests on US Southern Border Rose 5% in November, Reversing Downward Trend - CBP Data

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The monthly number of arrests on the US-Mexico border rose 5 percent in November after three-consecutive months of a downward trend, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data revealed.

The data showed on Friday that Border Patrol agents made 173,620 arrests on the US southern border in connection to illegal border crossings into the United States.

A majority of undocumented migrants apprehended on the southern border are single adults from Mexico or a foreign country that is not in the Northern Triangle region.

Illegal border crossings on the US-Mexico border reached an all-time record 1.7 million in fiscal year 2021, according to CBP data.

This year, the Biden administration witnessed several new records set on the US southern border related to illegal immigration, which experts believe was due to his campaign message that immigrants were welcomed to the United States.

In fiscal year 2021, the highest monthly total of apprehensions on the US southern border was in July, when the number hit a 20-year monthly high of 213,593 apprehensions.

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IMF Executive Board Establishes Group to Review Internal Governance After Georgieva Probe

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Executive Board announced that it has established a steering group to review the standards pertaining to internal governance, use of data and accountability following the scandal of inflating China's ranking in its "Doing Business" report that involved the IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva.

"The Executive Board has established a Steering Group to lead a follow-up review with the objective of helping to ensure the staff, Management, and Executive Board maintain the highest possible standards around internal governance, use of data, and accountability," IMF said in a press release on Friday.

The group will review current IMF procedures and systems, assess their effectiveness and will present recommendations to ensure the organization's arrangements in place reflect the best governing practices, the release said.

The review is expected to be completed by the 2022 Spring Meetings, the release added.

The World Bank had hired the WilmerHale law group to investigate allegations that staff had altered an index that measures the ease of doing business in member countries. The investigators found that World Bank officials pushed the team developing the index to manipulate it in several cases, most notably to improve China's place in the ranking.

Georgieva, who was the World Bank's CEO from January 2017 to September 2019, during which time she also served as its Interim President for three months, was among those implicated in the report scandal. She has denied all accusations.

Following the probe, the Executive Board of IMF had expressed confidence in Georgieva to continue to serve as the organization's managing director.

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JCPOA Talks Deal With Iran to Include Cameras at Karaj Nuclear Facility - US Official

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - During the seventh round of the Iran nuclear talks in Vienna, an agreement was reached to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to re-install cameras in the Iranian Karaj nuclear facility, a senior US State Department official said, "Thanks to the efforts of the director general of the IAEA...and with help of others including Russia, an agreement was reached that will allow the IAEA to re-install cameras at Karaj [nuclear facility]," the official said during a conference call on Friday.

The seventh round of talks in Vienna also resulted in a common understanding of what the text will be like that will serve as the basis for negotiations on the nuclear issues in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

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US to Consider 'All Options' to Stop Iran From Getting Nuclear Weapon - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will consider all options to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon should diplomatic talks between Washington and Tehran fail, a senior US State Department official told reporters.

"I think President [Joe] Biden has made clear that he will make sure that Iran does not acquire a nuclear weapon and that he considers diplomacy as the preferred and first option, but all other options will be considered if that doesn't succeed," the senior official said on Friday.

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JCPOA Talks Must Accelerate, Iran Should Return With Clear Set of Issues - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States wants to accelerate negotiations for a return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) due to the pace of progress being made by Iran's nuclear program, a senior US State Department official said on Friday.

"Regardless of whatever progress was made, the pace at which we are moving is not going to save the JCPOA. There's going to have to be an acceleration. Iran is going to have to come back with a clear set of issues that it prioritizes and realistic positions on how to resolve them... We don't have much time. Again, if it takes this much time to agree on a common agenda, imagine how much time it will take to resolve the issues upon that agenda. So there's going to have to be very significant acceleration," the senior official said.

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US Ready to Resume JCPOA Talks Before End of Year, No Date Yet on 8th Round - Official

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is ready to resume talks before the end of the year to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) but an eighth round of negotiations in Vienna has not been scheduled, a senior State Department official said.

"Can we resume before the end of the year? Sure we could," the official said during a conference call on Friday. "We stand ready to return, it wasn't our choice to leave. As far as I know, there's been no date announced for an eighth round."

The official said it is surprising that Iran chose to conclude the seventh round of negotiations in Vienna on Friday because the United States and other members of the P5+1 group of signatories were ready to continue work to advance talks.

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Wall Street Has Worst Week Since September Based on Inflation, Looming Rate Hike Worries

NEW YORK, December 17 (Sputnik) - Wall Street had its worst week since September as investors dumped technology to banking and energy stocks after fearing a double whammy from soaring inflation and impending rate hikes by the Federal Reserve.

"Trading will remain very choppy for the rest of the year as investors grapple falling trading volumes over the coming sessions," Ed Moya, head of research for the Americas at online trading platform OANDA, said.

The week's biggest plunge was in the Nasdaq Composite Index, which groups the world's most-valued stocks, including names such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google. Nasdaq tumbled almost 3%, with some 2.5% of the loss coming from Thursday's trading alone, after investors were overwhelmed by one staggering piece of inflation data after another, amid the Fed's message that it might have to raise rates three times next year to contain price pressures.

Aside from Nasdaq, the Dow Jones Industrial Average, an index which contains mostly industrial stocks, fell 1.7% on the week.

The S&P 500, which lists the top 500 US stocks, finished down almost 2%.

The last time the three indexes lost as much was during the final week of September.

The Federal Reserve has projected a 5.5% growth this year for the US economy and 4% next year, after a 3.5% contraction in 2020 caused by the coronavirus pandemic measures. Despite the strong projection, the central bank faces a significant problem with inflation running at near 40-year highs as prices have soared from the lows of the pandemic.

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'Modest Progress' Made During Seventh Round of Iran Nuclear Negotiations - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States and Iran made modest progress during the seventh round of negotiations in Vienna over a return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a senior State Department official told reporters.

"Back to the conclusion of the seventh round [of JCPOA negotiations], it was better than it might have been because there was some modest progress," the senior official said on Friday.

However, the progress made during the negotiations is outpaced by the progress being made by Iran in their nuclear program, threatening the possibility of a return to the JCPOA, the official also said. The US is ready to participate in an eight round of negotiations, although no date has been set, the official added.

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Nearly 50% of Americans Oppose War With Russia on Ukraine, 27% in Favor - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - Far more Americans oppose going to war with Russia in order to defend Ukraine than are in favor of doing so, a new YouGov poll commissioned by the conservative Charles Koch Institute and revealed.

When asked the question, "If Ukraine is invaded again by Russia, do you favor or oppose the US going to war with Russia to protect Ukraine's territorial integrity?" 28% strongly opposed the idea and another 20 % somewhat opposed it, totaling 48% in all, a report on the poll said on Friday.

However, only 9% strongly favored going to war with Russia with another 18% "somewhat" favoring it, the report said. Another 24% replied "don't know."

President Joe Biden has so far said he will not send US forces to fight Russia in the event of any invasion of Ukraine.

Russia has denied the accusations made by the United States and its allies that it fosters aggression and has said NATO intent to further expand on Russia's borders represents a national security threat and the government reserves the right to move troops and military hardware on its sovereign territory.

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Biden Admin Provides \$1.5Bln for Schools Meal Programs Hit by Supply Chain Snarls

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has allocated up to \$1.5 billion to fix US school meal programs hit by supply chain disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic measures, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said.

The funding will be channeled through the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Commodity Credit Corporation, with \$1 billion for schools to purchase food for their meal programs and another \$300 million for states to purchase foods to be distributed to schools, Vilsack said in a statement distributed by the White House on Friday.

"Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, school districts have met extraordinary challenges to ensure that every child has the food needed to learn, grow and thrive," Vilsack said. "The food and funds USDA is distributing will help ensure schools have the resources they need to continue to serve our nation's schoolchildren quality food they can depend on, all while building a stronger, fairer, and more competitive food system."

The so-called Supply Chain Assistance Funds will boost the meal system in up to 100,000 schools across the 50 US states, including public, tribal and charter schools, nonprofit private schools as well as residential child care institutions.

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Huntsville Company to Supply Space Flight Center With Technicians, Engineers - NASA

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - NASA announced in a press release that a technical company in Huntsville, Alabama, has won a contract to supply the space agency with new technicians and engineers.

"NASA has awarded the Marshall Engineering Technicians and Trades Support (METTS) III contract to RSi-QuantiTech of Huntsville, Alabama, to provide a wide range of engineering technicians and trade skills, as well as professional and management oversight of the technical staff," the release said on Friday.

The new staff will be employed at the agency's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama, and at the Michoud Assembly Facility in New Orleans, Louisiana, the release said. "The performance-based, cost-plus-award-fee contract has a potential mission services value of \$76.6 million and a maximum potential indefinite-delivery/indefinite-quantity value of \$196.8 million. The contract begins March 1, 2022, with a one-year base period," the release added. The contract will also include four one-year option periods that may be exercised at NASA's discretion, according to the release.

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US Court Denies Gyetvay's Motion to Dismiss Indictment - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The US District Court for the Middle District of Florida denied the motion filed by Russia's Novatek CFO Mark Gyetvay to dismiss the indictment against him.

"Defendant Mark A. Gyetvay's 'Motion to Dismiss the Indictment' is denied without prejudice to any right Defendant may have to challenge the superseding indictment," the court document signed by Judge Thomas Barber said on Friday.

The US authorities arrested Gyetvay on September 23 on tax evasion charges related to \$93 million he had saved in offshore accounts.

The Justice Department alleges that Gyetvay engaged in a scheme to defraud the US government by failing to disclose and pay taxes on the assets in the offshore accounts.

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Trump Admin. Deliberately Undermined COVID Response for Political Purposes - House Report

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration deliberately weakened the federal government's COVID-19 response for political reasons, the US House select subcommittee on the coronavirus crisis said in a report out on Friday.

"The Select Subcommittee has continued to uncover evidence of the Trump Administration's deliberate efforts to undermine the nation's coronavirus response for political purposes," the report said.

It accused the previous administration of purposefully weakening the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's testing guidance to "reduce the amount of testing being conducted and obscure how rapidly the virus was spreading across the country."

The report from the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives criticized the Trump team for promoting a "dangerous" herd immunity strategy that would have put "millions of lives at risk."

In addition, the subcommittee asserted that the previous administration failed to execute an effective early response strategy, address critical supply shortages in the early stages of the crisis, as well as implement adequate fraud controls.

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Florida Man Sentenced to Over 5 Years for Assault During US Capitol Breach - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - A Florida man has been sentenced to over five years in prison for assaulting law enforcement officers during the January 6 events at the US Capitol, the Justice Department said.

"Robert Scott Palmer, of Largo, Florida, was sentenced today to 63 months in prison for assaulting law enforcement with dangerous weapons during the breach of the US Capitol on Jan. 6, which disrupted a joint session of the U.S. Congress that was in the process of ascertaining and counting the electoral votes related to the presidential election," the Justice Department said in a press release on Friday.

Palmer's 63-month sentence is the longest for a defendant on charges related to the Capitol breach. He is also the first defendant to be sentenced on the charge of assaulting, resisting or impeding officers using a dangerous or deadly weapon, the release said.

Palmer threw a wooden plank at US Capitol Police and Washington Metropolitan Police and then sprayed them with a fire extinguisher that he later also threw at them during the events at the Capitol on January 6, the release added.

More than 700 individuals have been arrested for crimes related to the January 6 US Capitol Breach, including over 220 facing charges of impeding law enforcement, according to the Justice Department.

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US Disposed to Consider More Capabilities for NATO if Russia Invades Ukraine - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready to consider more military capabilities, including rotational elements, to be provided for its NATO allies in Europe in case Russia invades Ukraine, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said during a press briefing.

"I have no new rotational deployments to speak to in terms of our NATO allies," Kirby said on Friday. "[I]f there is an incursion, another incursion and if some of our NATO allies ask for additional capabilities or rotational elements, we will be positively disposed to consider that."

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US Coordinating With Allies to Address Haitian Security, Political Issues - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is coordinating with international partners through forums such as the International Partners Meeting held on Friday to address security and political challenges in Haiti, State Department Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian Nichols said.

"This morning [on Friday] I hosted a productive discussion regarding the situation in Haiti among 14 partner countries and several international organizations... The United States convened this group to discuss conditions on the ground in Haiti and identify tangible steps to address Haiti's security, political, and economic challenges," Nichols said.

To that end, Nichols's team at the State Department will establish a working-level international coordination group to align efforts to help Haiti, he added.

The US on Friday led the senior-level virtual International Partners Meeting on Haiti to work on a unified approach to assisting Haiti restore its democratic institutions and prevent the further deterioration of security and economic conditions, the State Department said.

There's broad agreement that the security situation in Haiti is a political challenge and not a military one, Nichols said. The participating nations in the meeting agreed that international support for Haiti's National Police is essential to progress in the country, Nichols added.

The meeting came following news that the 12 remaining Christian missionaries kidnapped in Haiti in October were freed. Nichols said that the news was welcome, but declined to comment on specifics of the US interagency effort to secure their release.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) -

RUSSIA SECURITY PROPOSALS

* Russia does not consider its security guarantees proposals to the United States and NATO to be unacceptable, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said on Friday.

* Russia sees no change in the positions of NATO and the United States after they received proposals on security guarantees, Ryabkov said.

* The Biden administration has seen Russia's newly unveiled proposals for European security but will not hold any talks on those until it consults with its European allies, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

* The US is fundamentally prepared to engage in dialogue with the Russian Federation about European security, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said.

US POLICY ON UKRAINE

* The Biden administration is considering sending military equipment to Ukraine that was previously allocated for Afghanistan prior to its collapse, the Wall Street Journal reported on Friday citing US and Ukrainian officials.

* The United States and its allies are preparing severe consequences on Russia through economic and financial measures should they decide to advance on Ukraine, a senior Biden administration official said.

* The United States remains gravely concerned with the alleged Russian military buildup on the border with Ukraine and any aggression will have severe economic and financial consequences for Moscow, the senior Biden administration official said.

* The United States continues an intensive dialogue with Ukraine on providing security assistance and will keep these communication lines open as necessary, a senior administration official said.

IRAN NUCLEAR AGREEMENT

* The seventh round of Vienna-based talks on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), held on Friday, was successful as it created the basis for more intensive negotiations, Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov said on Friday.

* The time frame for Iran to attain a nuclear weapon is unacceptably short, a senior US administration official said.

NORD STREAM 2

* The Nord Stream 2 AG has started filling the pipeline's second string with gas, the operator said on Friday.

* Gas supplies to Europe via the Nord Stream 2 pipeline may begin after the certification process is completed, German energy ministry spokeswoman Susanne Ungrad said.

COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS

* Canada will again require residents returning from short trips abroad to submit a negative pre-arrival polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test starting on December 21, Canada's Health Minister Jean-Yves Duclos said on Friday.

NAVALNY CASE

* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said while speaking about the possibility of pardoning Alexei Navalny that there is a certain order, including the admission of guilt.

* In response to London's sanctions against seven Russian citizens over the Alexey Navalny case, Moscow banned the same number of UK citizens from entering Russia, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

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US Defense Chief Talks Cooperation With German Counterpart on Russia - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his German counterpart Christine Lambrecht discussed cooperation between their two countries to address challenges including Russia's activity in eastern Europe, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"This morning he [Austin] spoke by phone with German Federal Minister of Defense Christine Lambrecht this morning to congratulate her on her new appointment to the role," Kirby said during a press briefing. "They discussed their commitment to work together on a full range of challenges including addressing Russia's destabilizing actions in eastern Europe, NATO alliance unity, maintaining positive trajectory on defense investments and of course increasing cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region."

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National Institutes of Health Postpone Resuming Regular Work Due to COVID-19 - Director

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) has to postpone resuming regular work until at least January as a result of the current situation with the novel coronavirus, NIH Director Francis Collins said on Friday.

"At NIH, we unfortunately have delayed our plans. We thought people were going to come back to their workplaces back in November, and then we thought we are not ready for that because of Delta," Collins said in a virtual conversation with the Washington Post. "Then we thought we have people come back in January, and we just delayed that again, because it is unclear what the status will be."

Collins emphasized that working together next to each other is very important to be effective in science.

"We should try to get back there, we have to do so safely," he said.

Collins urged his colleagues to be careful when coming back to their laboratories and maintain all safety measures, including wearing masks and keeping physical distancing.

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US Believes That Putin Has Yet to Make Decision About Action in Ukraine – Sullivan

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) – Russian President Vladimir Putin has not yet made a decision to engage in some sort of military action in Ukraine, and the Biden administration has high confidence in the intelligence community's analysis of the Russian military buildup, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"The current assessment of the US government is that he [Putin] has not yet made a decision [to invade Ukraine]," Sullivan said during an event organized by the Council on Foreign Relations. "[T]he analysis that the intelligence community has laid out, indicates that the Russian government is giving serious consideration and operational planning to such an exercise, is well validated."

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US Has Not Gained Traction on Denuclearization of North Korea - Security Adviser Sullivan

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States has not yet gained traction on diplomatic efforts to achieve the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"We have not gotten traction in diplomacy with North Korea on [denuclearization] over the course of this year... When I say we haven't gained traction, we have not sat down at the table with North Korea this year to have that conversation," Sullivan said during an event at the Council on Foreign Relations.

North Korea has continued to test certain capabilities and refrained from other forms of provocation, Sullivan said. The US continues to both publicly and privately communicate its willingness and readiness to engage with North Korea in diplomacy, Sullivan added.

Japan and the United States' foreign and defense ministers will meet on January 7 in Washington for talks on major security issues, including the nuclear and missile threat posed by North Korea, the Kyodo news agency reported on Wednesday.

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US State of Ohio to Deploy 1,050 National Guard Members to Staff Hospitals - Governor

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The US state of Ohio has decided to deploy more than 1,000 members of the National Guard to support local hospitals and testing locations that face an increased number of novel coronavirus cases, the Governor's office said in a statement on Friday.

"Governor [Mike] DeWine mobilized 1,050 members of the Ohio National Guard to help relieve the hospital staffing strain caused by the rising number of hospitalized COVID-19 patients is causing," the statement said.

Of the total mobilized National Guard members, approximately 150 are highly-trained medical professionals and will deploy to help meet what it called were "critical needs" at hospitals and testing locations, the statement said. The Other 900 National Guard members will help with patient transport, housekeeping, and food services, it added.

The selected group of National Guard members is expected to be deployed on Monday.

The governor explained in the statement that the decision was taken due to the increase in hospital admissions causing the medical facilities to postpone elective surgeries, transfer patients to other hospitals, impose visitation standards and implement crisis standards of care. The Ohio authorities have reported that more than 4,700 residents, or 20 percent of all hospital patients, have the novel coronavirus, according to official data.

The health officials in South Africa, where the latest coronavirus variant - the Omicron - was detected, have said the infections were in vaccinated individuals and the cases were mild. US health officials have also said the cases detected in the United States have been mild.

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Biden Mulls Sending Ukraine Military Equipment Once Allocated for Afghanistan - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is considering sending military equipment to Ukraine that was previously allocated for Afghanistan prior to its collapse, the Wall Street Journal reported on Friday citing US and Ukrainian officials.

The report said Ukrainian officials are pressing the US government to provide helicopters, including Russian-made Mi-17s, and other military equipment that was meant for the now-defunct Afghan National Security Forces.

Ukraine is also pressing the United States to provide air-defense systems, including Stinger surface-to-air missiles, the report added.

The United States could provide Ukraine with five Mi-17 helicopters that were used by the Afghan military but were undergoing maintenance in Eastern Europe, the report said.

Ukraine is also after 12 Black Hawk helicopters that the United States allocated for the Afghan military but had not delivered, the report added.

Moreover, the report said that according to a US official there are stockpiles of US and NATO ammunition in Romania and Bulgaria that could be made available to Ukraine.

However, the White House is hesitant about sending more arms to Ukraine due to concerns it could escalate tensions with Russia and set back diplomatic efforts for stability in the region, the report said citing members of Congress and US government officials.

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RPT - US Assessing Ukraine Security Needs, Putting Together Potential Packages - Sullivan
(Repeat to fix typo in lede)

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is constantly assessing Ukraine's security needs and putting together potential assistance packages amid rising tensions between Kiev and Moscow, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"We are constantly assessing additional needs that Ukraine has, putting together potential packages, and those packages are actively under consideration, and, of course, it will ultimately be up to the President to make a determination about the next steps in this regard," Sullivan said during remarks at the Council on Foreign Relations.

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US Assessing Ukraine Security Needs, Putting Together Potential Packages - Sullivan

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"We are constantly assessing additional needs that Ukraine has, putting together potential packages, and those packages are actively under consideration, and, of course, it will ultimately be up to the President to make a determination about the next steps in this regard," Sullivan said during remarks at the Council on Foreign Relations.

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Iran Nuclear Talks 'Not Going Well,' US Has Greater Alignment With China, Russia- Sullivan
WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - While the negotiations on the Iran nuclear program are not going well, the good news is that the US remains united with its European partners and enjoys a greater alignment of positions on the issue with China and Russia, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"It [Iran nuclear talks] is not going well in the sense that we do not yet have a pathway back into the JCPOA [the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action]," Sullivan said during an event organized by the Council on Foreign Relations. "What is going well, is unity with our European partners, greater alignment with China and Russia, and I think an increasing recognition by Iran that it needs to come to the table in a seriously constructive way and that our patience is by no means unlimited."

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US Directs Federal Agencies to Address Vulnerabilities in Java-Based Software - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency issued an emergency directive on Friday ordering US federal agencies to address crucial software vulnerabilities.

"The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) issued Emergency Directive 22-02 today requiring federal civilian departments and agencies to assess their internet-facing network assets for the Apache Log4j vulnerabilities and immediately patch these systems or implement other appropriate mitigation measures," CISA said in a notice.

The agency said in the notice that its directive was issued in response to activity from multiple threat actors exploiting vulnerabilities found in Java-based logging package Log4j.

CISA also said it is working with partners in the public and private sectors to identify vulnerable products and encourage all potentially affected organizations to address the issue immediately. The directive will be updated to provide more mitigation actions, the notice added.

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US 'Fundamentally Prepared' for Dialogue With Russia - National Security Adviser Sullivan

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The US is fundamentally prepared to engage in dialogue with the Russian Federation about European security, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Friday at a Council on Foreign Relations event.

"We are fundamentally prepared for dialogue. Russia has now put on the table its concerns with American and NATO activities. We're going to put on the table our concern with Russian activities that we believe harm our interest and values," Sullivan said. "Fundamentally, our strategy is going to be to coordinate closely, to have allied unity, and then be prepared to sit with Russia and respond positively to the idea that we can have a discussion in an appropriate format on the principle of 'nothing about you without you' and see where it takes us."

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Biden Mulls Sending Ukraine Military Equipment Once Allocated for Afghanistan - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is considering sending military equipment to Ukraine that was previously allocated for Afghanistan prior to its collapse, The Wall Street Journal reported on Friday citing US and Ukrainian officials.

The report said Ukrainian officials are pressing the US government to provide helicopters, including Russian-made Mi-17s, and other military equipment that was meant for the now-defunct Afghan National Security Forces.

Ukraine is also pressing the United States to provide air-defense systems, including Stinger surface-to-air missiles, the report added.

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Guterres on Moscow's New Security Proposals: UN Welcomes US-Russia Dialogue
(Updates with more details, background in paras 4-7)

UNITED NATIONS, December 17 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomes the dialogue between Russia and the United States on the new security arrangements with NATO proposed by Moscow, United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq told Sputnik on Friday. "The Secretary-General has taken [note] of the relevant media reports. We welcome dialogue, at various levels, between the Russian Federation and the United States, to address differences, de-escalate tensions, and safeguard regional peace," Haq said.

The spokesperson also said Guterres has reminded all stakeholders of their responsibility "to ensure a peaceful settlement of the conflict in eastern Ukraine accordance with the Minsk Agreements as endorsed by the Security Council in its resolution 2202 (2015) and reiterates the UN's support to all ongoing negotiation efforts to that end."

Earlier on Friday, Russia released its draft proposals on security guarantees, including that NATO must commit to not expand further, such as in Ukraine and abandon military activities in that country as well as in Eastern Europe, Transcaucasia and Central Asia. Another proposal stipulates that Russia and NATO should not deploy intermediate- and short-range missiles in areas where they can hit each other's territory.

Security issue has surged in importance amid tensions in and around Ukraine, as United States and its allies have accused Russia of deploying troops and military hardware near the Ukrainian border in preparation for an invasion. Russia has repeatedly denied the accusations, saying that NATO's military activities near its borders are a national security threat. Russia has also said it has the right to move forces within its own sovereign territory.

US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin held virtual talks on December 7 during which they discussed the situation with respect to Ukraine. Biden voiced concern over the current developments and called for a diplomatic solution. Putin said that Kiev did not comply with the Minsk accords and also note that NATO continues to seek expansion eastward while conducting military build-up near the Russian borders.

On Wednesday, US Assistant Secretary of State Karen Donfried met in Moscow with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov and Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff Dmitry Kozak. The Russian Foreign Ministry said after the meeting that the participants had discussed the security guarantees in light of the ongoing attempts by the United States and NATO to change the military and political situation in Europe in their favor.

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Ex-Trump Aide Stone Says Appeared Before January 6 Panel But Did Not Answer Questions

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - Former Trump adviser Roger Stone on Friday said he appeared for a disposition before the House committee probing the January 6 Capitol riot but did not answer any questions from the panel.

"This morning in fulfillment of a federal subpoena I did my civic duty and I responded as required by law," Stone told reporters. "I did invoke my fifth amendment rights to every question, not because I have done anything wrong but because I am fully aware of the House Democrats' long history of fabricating perjury charges on the basis of comments that are innocuous in material or irrelevant."

On Monday, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution to hold former White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows in criminal contempt of Congress for failing to fully cooperate with the January 6 committee. Contempt of Congress charges can result in a penalty of up to one year in prison and a fine of up to \$100,000.

In addition, former Trump adviser Steve Bannon is already being prosecuted for refusing to cooperate with the House committee probe into the Capitol riot. He faces two counts of contempt of Congress, to which he pleaded not guilty, for refusing to comply with a congressional subpoena that ordered him to provide testimony.

On January 6, a group of Trump supporters entered the US Capitol in a bid to protest the lawmakers certifying the 2020 election results. Trump claimed the election results in several US states were invalid due to election and voter fraud that robbed him of election victory. The authorities shot one protester dead during the incident and charged over 700 people for participating in the event.

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US Children Exposed to COVID Can Stay in School Through 'Test-to-Stay' - CDC

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - School children in the United States who are exposed to COVID can resume in-class learning as long as they are tested regularly for the virus, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said on Friday in an effort to prevent home-based quarantines that are disruptive to lessons.

"Schools may consider the use of TTS [Test-to-Stay] to minimize the impact of quarantine and limit school absences after a SARS-CoV-2 exposure in the K-12 school setting," the CDC said in newly-released COVID guidelines for schools.

Additionally, the agency entrusted with leading America's battle against the pandemic recommended that every student aged 5 years or older get a COVID-19 vaccine as protection.

"Adolescents ages 16 years and older can get a booster shot at least six months after a primary series," it added. "Widespread vaccination for COVID-19 is a critical tool to best protect everyone from COVID-19 and COVID-19 related complications."

Home-based quarantines of students as well as forced remote-learning have been two of the most political and divisive issues around the two-year long pandemic, with parents who are typically opposed to COVID-19 vaccinations accusing health authorities and the Biden

administration of overhyping concerns about the virus. Many parents unable to work from home or pay for daycare have also been bitter about such measures.

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Guterres on Moscow's New Security Proposals: UN Welcomes US-Russia Dialogue

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US Working Through Arrangements for F-35 Sale to UAE, Working Out Concerns - Official

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is working through arrangements with the United Arab Emirates to facilitate a \$23 billion sale of 50 F-35 fighter jets, but the two sides are currently working out concerns related to the deal, a senior administration official said on Friday.

"We have to conclude some arrangements, there are some things that the UAE has asked for that were answered by the last administration, so we're working through this with them and we also have some concerns that have to be worked out," the US official said during a conference call.

Abu Dhabi earlier this week announced the suspension of negotiations on the deal to buy US F-35 fighter jets, in addition to drones and advanced munitions, citing technical requirements, "sovereign operational restrictions," and cost and benefit analysis.

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Omicron to Become Dominant Coronavirus Variant in US in Coming Weeks - Health Agency

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The Omicron will become the dominant coronavirus variant in the United States in the coming weeks, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said on Friday.

"Though Delta continues to spread widely in the United States, Omicron is increasing rapidly, and we expect it become a dominant strain in the US as it has in other countries in the coming weeks," Walensky said during a virtual press briefing.

The CDC director noted that Omicron variant cases have so far been reported in at least 39 US states.

Walensky also said that residents who have been double vaccinated and those who have received boosters are among the infected with the Omicron and the cases have been mild.

The United States has vaccines and boosters to protect residents from COVID-19 and knows of multilayer prevention strategies, she said, adding that masking, physical distancing and hand hygiene measures used so far should continue to be practiced.

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US Bracing for Attacks on Forces in Iraq as Soleimani Killing Anniversary Nears - Official

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is preparing for attacks on forces in Iraq in January, which marks the anniversary of the US assassination of Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani, a senior administration official said on Friday.

"Since July we've had about five months of calm, the longest period of calm we've had in Iraq I think in three years, we're looking for that to continue but of course we very much anticipate heading into the first part of next year ... there's the anniversary of the Soleimani strike, there's Iraq's government formation process and a few other milestones," the US official said during a conference call. "Some of these attacks might start up again but we of course we're ready for that and prepared."

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Canada Lifts Travel Ban on 10 African Countries - Health Minister
(Adds details in para 3)

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - Canada is scrapping a ban on international travel from 10 African countries, which was introduced over Omicron fears, starting December 18 at 11:59 p.m., Health Minister Jean-Yves Duclos said on Friday.

"We have taken the decision to lift the specific measures for travelers returning from the 10 countries initially listed," Duclos said. "While we recognize that this initial emergency measure created controversy, we believe it was necessary measures to slow the arrival of Omicron in Canada."

The country's ban on travelers from Botswana, Egypt, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe was initially set to expire on January 31.

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Canada Reimposes COVID-19 Testing for Short Foreign Trips - Health Minister

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - Canada will again require residents returning from short trips abroad to submit a negative pre-arrival polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test starting on December 21, Canada's Health Minister Jean-Yves Duclos said on Friday.

"We are reintroducing the requirements for a pre-arrival PCR test result for all travelers leaving the country for less than 72 hours as of December 21," Duclos said.

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US Quietly Working to Expand Abraham Accords in Middle East - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is quietly working to expand the Trump-era Abraham Accords in the Middle East, a senior Biden administration official said on Friday.

"We've worked to strengthen the existing Abraham Accords and we are working quietly but quite judiciously to expand the Abraham Accords," the official said during a conference call. "These things take some time but very much a focus of ours."

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Time Frame for Iran Nuclear Breakout Point 'Unacceptably Short' - US Official

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The time frame for Iran to attain a nuclear weapon is unacceptably short, a senior US administration official said on Friday.

"[I]t's really short, it's unacceptably short," the US official said during a conference call when asked what is the estimate of the breakout time for an Iranian nuclear weapon.

Iran is rapidly accelerating its nuclear program but it is now isolated diplomatically from the United States and its allies, as well as Russia and China, the US official said.

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US Unlikely to Salvage F-35 Deal With UAE Amid Anti-China 'Hysteria' - Experts

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The multibillion-dollar US F-35 jet sale the United Arab Emirates recently suspended could permanently be killed by the Biden administration's inability to overcome concerns about the Gulf state's dealings with China, analysts told Sputnik. Abu Dhabi earlier this week announced the suspension of negotiations on a \$23 billion deal to buy fifty US F-35s, in addition to drones and advanced munitions, citing technical requirements, "sovereign operational restrictions," and cost/benefit analysis.

US security requirements designed to protect against Chinese espionage are among the key drivers behind the UAE's decision to suspend talks. The US has also raised concerns over Abu Dhabi's relationship with China, including its use of Huawei 5G technology.

"At the moment, this is bargaining by the UAE, not a rejection of the proposed purchase: But a rejection is entirely possible," former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Chas Freeman told Sputnik. "Given the level of anti-China hysteria in the Pentagon at present, it's hard to say whether the sale will go through."

Freeman, a former assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, said the United States risks killing the deal for Lockheed Martin due to its excessive restrictions on the technology it is prepared to transfer.

"What was a Trump administration enticement to compensate Abu Dhabi for the political difficulty of entering an overt relationship with Israel is now caught up in Washington's obsession with the growth of Chinese power," Freeman said.

If the sale does not go through, Freeman added, it will have an effect on the UAE's new relationship with Israel, "which is very unpopular with ordinary Emiratis."

"Wheels within wheels are in motion," Freeman said.

The UAE has taken heat in many parts of the Arab world for agreeing to the Abraham Accords – a US-brokered effort to normalize relations with Israel, which could be a factor in the Gulf state's decision.

Institute for Research Middle Eastern Policy (IRmep) Director of Research, Grant Smith, said UAE leaders were already disappointed at the failure of Israel to use its political power in Washington through the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

"This sale is dead," Smith told Sputnik. "The UAE is now reeling under Abraham Accord pressure to acquiesce to Israeli strategic initiatives, but AIPAC and Israel are showing they can't really deliver things from the United States that UAE wants, like the advanced version of the fighter."

Smith noted that at the beginning of this month, the UAE announced it would buy 80 French-built Rafale fighter jets and 12 military helicopters in a gigantic \$19 billion deal that was the largest ever overseas sale of the combat aircraft.

"So the French fighters are good enough," Smith said. "And UAE may cancel lesser known Abraham Accord concessions ... which could have vastly enriched AIPAC and state Israel lobby groups."

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US Preparing 'Severe Consequences' If Russia Advances on Ukraine - Official

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States and its allies are preparing severe consequences on Russia through economic and financial measures should they decide to advance on Ukraine, a senior administration official said on Friday.

"With our allies and partners, we are in the process of preparing the severe consequences that would result if Russia decides to take the path of further aggression. I would say that these largely are composed of economic and financial measures, and we are prepared to consider a number of things that we had not considered in the past and the results will be very profound on the Russian Federation, but I'm not going to go into detail," the senior administration official said.

The US is also concerned about Russia's narrative that Ukraine is seeking to provoke a conflict with them, the official said. The situation is the responsibility of Russia and there is no aggressive action on the part of Ukraine, the official added.

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US Urges Amhara Leaders in Ethiopia to End Violence in Western Tigray Region - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States called on the Amhara authorities to stop perpetrating violence against civilians in Ethiopia's Tigray region amid reports alleging mass detentions, killings and forced expulsions, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"The United States is gravely concerned by unconfirmed new reports alleging mass detentions, killings, and forced expulsions of ethnic Tigrayans in western Tigray by Amhara security forces," Price said in a statement. "We call on Amhara leaders to renounce violence against civilians." Price urged the Ethiopian government to investigate the reports and hold those responsible to account.

The State Department also called on Eritrea to withdraw its troops from Ethiopia and urged all armed actors in the war to cease hostilities, stop human rights abuses and commit to an inclusive national dialogue to resolve the conflict.

According to the United Nations, 1.2 million people have been forced to flee western Tigray since the beginning of the conflict in November 2020. Rights groups have alleged that thousands of civilians have been detained and arrested without charge, kept in poor conditions, tortured and deprived of basic rights.

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Blinken Tells New Bulgaria Leader US Plans to Expand Defense Partnership - State Dept. WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told new Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov that the Biden administration plans to expand its defense partnership with Sofia particularly in the areas of modernization and 5G security, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov yesterday ... and reaffirmed our intent to expand our partnership into new domains such as the promotion of Bulgaria's clean energy transition, defense modernization, and 5G security," Price said in a readout of the conversation.

Blinken also congratulated Petkov on his December 13 confirmation and for Bulgaria's successful formation of a new government, Price said.

"Secretary Blinken expressed the United States' appreciation for Bulgaria as a reliable NATO ally ... while working toward a shared vision of a strong and vibrant transatlantic relationship and an expanded European Union," Price added.

The United States also supports the new government's focus on the COVID-19 crisis, rule of law and anti-corruption reforms, and greater energy diversification and independence, according to the readout.

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US Remains Gravely Concerned With Russia Troop Buildup on Ukraine Border - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States remains gravely concerned with the alleged Russian military buildup on the border with Ukraine and any aggression will have severe

economic and financial consequences for Moscow, a senior Biden administration official said on Friday.

"[W]e remain gravely concerned with the large and unprovoked Russian build up on Ukraine's borders," the official said during a press briefing. "We are in the process of preparing the severe consequences that would result if Russia decides to take the path of further aggression. I would say that the these largely are composed of economic and financial measures."

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US Sees No Advantage to Holding Negotiations in Public, Unlike Russia - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States, unlike Russia, sees no advantage to holding security negotiations in public and believes diplomacy must be done in a confidential manner in order to work, a senior Biden administration official said on Friday.

"Unlike the Russian Federation, we don't see any advantage to conducting these negotiations in public, neither the conversations that we're having with our allies and partners nor the conversations that we will collectively have with Russia. We believe that if there is a chance for diplomacy to work, that it has to be done in a confidential manner," the senior administration official said.

Any negotiations will have to proceed on the basis of reciprocity, the core principles and foundational documents of European security, as well as with the participation of European nations, the official added.

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US Interested in Christmas Ceasefire in Donbas, Just as Normandy Countries Are – Official

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) – The United States is interested in seeing a Christmas ceasefire in eastern Ukraine, just as the Normandy format countries are, and the issue is being discussed, a senior Biden administration official said on Friday.

"Just to underscore, the Normandy format remains the central format for the Minsk negotiations. The US is prepared to use our bilateral channel to Moscow and to Kiev to support it if we can. We are particularly interested, as the Normandy partners are, in seeing a Christmas ceasefire and a prisoner exchange. That is something under discussion," the official said during a press briefing.

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US in 'Intensive Dialogue' With Ukraine on Providing Security Assistance – Senior Official

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) – The United States continues an intensive dialogue with Ukraine on providing security assistance and will keep these communication lines open as necessary, a senior administration official said on Friday.

"We are also in intensive dialogue with the Ukrainians at all levels, including DoD [Department of Defense] with regard to their needs. So, we will continue to keep those lines open as necessary and as we see what the Ukrainian requirements for," the official said during a press briefing.

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Inflation in US 'Too High' But Recession Can Still Be Avoided - Federal Reserve Official

NEW YORK, December 17 (Sputnik) - The pace of inflation in the United States may be too high but it can still be managed with rate hikes and without a recession, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York President John Williams said on Friday.

"We're very focused on inflation; it is obviously too high right now," Williams said during an appearance on the CNBC network. "Monetary policy over the past quarter century or even longer has shown we can accomplish and deliver stable low inflation and, you know, try to mitigate the effects of recessions and we can get the economy back to maximum employment. I am confident we can do that."

The US economy briefly slipped into a recession in 2020 as a result of the coronavirus pandemic measures and shrank 3.5% for all of last year. The Federal Reserve has projected a 5.5% growth for this year and 4% for 2022. The central bank's problem though is inflation, which is running at near 40-year highs as prices have soared from the lows of the pandemic due to higher wage demands and supply chain disruptions.

On Wednesday, the Federal Reserve announced it will double the pace of the tapering of the US pandemic-era stimulus beginning in January and signaled there could be as many as three rate hikes in 2022 so long as the coronavirus does not greatly disrupt economic growth or the labor market. Benchmark rates could rise to as high as 0.9% in 2022, suggesting that a 0.3% hike could be applied three times during the year, it said.

Under the accelerated stimulus taper, the Federal Reserve will cut \$30 billion monthly from its scheduled buying of \$120 billion of bonds and assets a month that it had committed to since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March of 2020. Prior to this, the central bank had set a taper rate of \$15 billion a month in November.

Williams said the doubling of the taper was appropriate and there was no need to expedite it further.

"I don't see that there's any real benefit to try to speed it up further," he said. "We like to do things in a way that's very carefully studied, very carefully communicated ... without creating disruption in markets."

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US Gave Allies Russia's Proposals on European Security, Ready to Discuss Them - Official

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States shared Russia's concrete proposals on European security with allies and is prepared to discuss them, a senior administration official said on Friday.

"As you know, we received some concrete proposals from the Russians when Assistant Secretary Donfried was in Moscow. We have shared those with our allies. As we have said, we are prepared to discuss them. That said, there are some things in those documents that the Russians know will be unacceptable, they know that, but there are other things that we are prepared to work with and that merit some discussions," the senior administration official said.

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US to Get Back to Russia With Its Security Proposal on Ukraine Next Week - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States will get back to Russia with its own security proposal on Ukraine sometime next week, a senior Biden administration official said on Friday.

"We have got a list here from the Russians that encompasses many of the formats that we have used in the past. So, we have to figure out how we rack and stack that and we will get back to them with a concrete proposal sometime next week," the official said during a press briefing.

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White House Prepared to Discuss Security Guarantees With Russia – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is open to talks with Russia regarding the latter's newly unveiled proposals on European security and will be in touch with Moscow soon, a White House official said on Friday, according to media reports.

"We are prepared to discuss matters of security and strategic concern with Russia. We are having discussions with European allies and partners, and will be in touch with the Russian government on next steps soon," the official said, as quoted by Reuters.

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UN Human Rights Council Orders Probe of Rights Abuses in Ethiopia Conflict

UNITED NATIONS, December 17 (Sputnik) - The UN Human Rights Council voted on Friday to launch an international investigation into alleged human rights abuses in the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia.

"The UN Human Rights Council adopts by vote a resolution establishing an international commission of experts on Ethiopia to conduct an investigation into allegations of human rights violations and abuses by all parties to the conflict," the council said in a statement via Twitter. The resolution was adopted in a 21-15 vote, and 11 member states abstained. Since its beginning in November 2020, the conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray has claimed thousands of lives and displaced over 2 million people. People of Tigrayan origin are reported to have been targeted for being associated with the rebel Tigray People's Liberation Front. According to rights groups, thousands of civilians have been detained and arrested without charge, kept in poor conditions, tortured, and deprived of basic rights.

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Majority of Canadians Still Support New COVID-19 Measures Though Less Than Before - Report

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - More than 55% of Canadians support possible lockdown measures as the country finds itself on the verge of the fifth pandemic wave driven by the spread of the coronavirus Omicron variant, Global News reported on Friday citing a new poll by Ipsos.

Despite seemingly solid public support, far fewer Canadians are backing the possible new restrictions than in July when almost 70 percent were in favor of a national lockdown, the report said.

Ipsos Public Affairs CEO Darrell Bricker said he believes that the main reason for the dwindling support reflects a lack of understanding whether another lockdown is the right thing to do given the high vaccination rates in Canada.

The poll found the highest support for lockdown in the provinces of Quebec and British Columbia, and lowest in the provinces of Ontario and Alberta, the report said.

In addition, more than 80% of Canadians believe that Omicron will delay the country's return to normal, the report also said.

The poll was conducted online December 10-15 among 1,001 Canadians aged 18 and older.

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US Imposes Sanctions on Central African Republic Rebel Group Leader Ali Darassa - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on Ali Darassa, leader of the Central African Republic (CAR) rebel group Unity for Peace in Central Africa, the US Treasury Department said on Friday.

Darassa has been added to the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), the Treasury Department said in a press release.

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Russia's Butina Loses Bid to Challenge Conviction on Charges of Acting as Foreign Agent
(Adds details in paras 3, 4; background in para 5)

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) – Russian citizen Maria Butina, who spent 18 months in a US prison, has lost her bid to challenge conviction on charges of acting as a foreign agent for Russia, according to a court document.

"Defendant's Motion to Vacate is DENIED," US District Judge Tanya Chutkan said in a notice. Butina's petitions are not proper vehicles to vacate her conviction or sentence, and such motions are typically barred from review, the judge added.

"The court can neither make Butina's arguments for her nor identify a sufficient ... claim in Butina's pleadings," the judge said.

Butina was arrested in the US in July 2018 and sentenced to 18 months in prison for "conspiring to work for a foreign government." To reduce a much longer prison time, she had to plead guilty to one count of conspiracy to act as a foreign agent. The Russian national was deported home in October 2019 after her sentence was slightly reduced for good behavior.

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US Will Not Discuss Russian Security Proposal Without European Allies - White House
(Adds details in paras 3-6, background in para 7)

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has seen Russia's newly unveiled proposals for European security but will not hold any talks on the ideas until it consults with its European allies, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"We have seen the Russian proposals, we're discussing them with our European allies and partners," Psaki said when asked for a reaction to Russia's readiness to hold talks on the ideas as early as Saturday. "I will note that there will be no talks on European security without our European allies and partners."

Psaki referred to the North Atlantic Council's position that any dialogue with Russia would have to proceed on the basis of reciprocity and address NATO's concerns. These conversations should be based on the core principal and foundational documents of European security, she added.

"We will not compromise the key principles on which European security is built, including that all countries have the right to decide their own future," Psaki said.

The West and Russia have been discussing strategic concerns for decades, involving many different levels of communication, she noted.

"There is no reason we cannot do that moving forward to reduce instability, but we are going to do that in partnership and coordination with our allies and partners," Psaki said.

Earlier in the day, Russia released its draft proposals on security guarantees. They suggest in particular that NATO should commit to not expanding further, including Ukraine, and must abandon military activity in Ukraine, Eastern Europe, Transcaucasia and Central Asia. Another provision says that Russia and NATO should not deploy intermediate- and short-range missiles in areas from where they can hit each other's territory.

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US DHS Says No Data on Any Specific School Threats, Urges Vigilance Amid TikTok Warnings

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Homeland Security said on Friday that there is no data indicating any specific threats to schools, but recommended communities to stay alert amid warnings of possible December 17 school shootings and bombings circulating on TikTok.

On Thursday, messages encouraging students to stay home Friday due to bombing and shooting threats at schools on December 17 started to circulate on the TikTok social network across the US.

"DHS is aware of public reporting that suggests possible threats to schools on December 17, 2021. DHS does not have any information indicating any specific, credible threats to schools but recommends communities remain alert," the agency tweeted.

It added that it will continue to monitor and keep the public informed.

"Individuals should report suspicious activity to local law enforcement. If you see something, say something," the DHS continued.

The US law enforcement agencies all urged students to stay home on Friday over the unconfirmed threatening messages. Police departments, FBI and schools' management across the US believe these threats may be a nationwide "TikTok challenge" or are being posted as an excuse to skip school before the winter break.

Schools and police departments took precautionary measures to increase security and patrols on campuses.

Meanwhile, TikTok responded on Twitter saying that it deals with threats, even if rumored, and is working with the US law enforcement to investigate any potential violence at schools, but "have not found evidence of such threats originating or spreading via TikTok."